INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

SYNOPSIS
Submitted to Ranchi University for Ph.D. Registration
In
POLITICAL SCIENCE (Faculty of Social Science)
2024

SUPERVISOR
Dr. Rashmimala Sahu
Sr. Assistant Professor & H.O.D., Political Science
Nirmala College, Ranchi University
Ranchi, Jharkhand

RESEARCHER
Aishna Surin

INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

State of the Art

South Asia is located in the southern subregion of Asia and consists of countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. It is characterised by an 'asymmetric power equation'. This is due to the benefits that India has vis-a-vis its neighbours in terms of its large size and population, central location, sharing land or water boundaries with all the countries in the region and ultimately being the most politically and economically stable in South Asia. These benefits definitely grant a dominant position to India and act as an asset but at the same time it also becomes a liability when India's neighbours start looking at it with apprehension.

Though India has used its hard power capabilities to deal with its troubled relations with its neighbours in the past and might have even succeeded at that but it has attributed an image of a 'regional hegemon' to India. Thus, to win the trust of its neighbours and improve its image in the region as that of a 'credible leader', it becomes essential for India to use its soft power capabilities with its neighbours.

Before looking at the various instruments of soft power used by India, it is first necessary to understand the concept of soft power. The term 'soft power' was first coined and popularised by an American neoliberal scholar, Joseph Nye, who defined it as the ability of the country to shape the preferences of other countries through the co-optive means of agenda setting, persuasion and attraction rather than to coerce or influence the other to do a certain thing which is in the case of hard power. In simple terms, Nye explains hard power as push and soft power as pull.

Shashi Tharoor describes soft power as not being about conquering others but about being yourself and appealing to others. According to him, "soft power is the greatest asset for India in the 21st century". Based on these definitions of soft power, it can be inferred that soft power is about the world's perceptions of what the country is all about.

India's usage of soft power can be understood using Nye's classification of soft power resources into three categories :

1. Culture - those aspects of a country's culture which is seen as being attractive
2. Political values - values to which a country lives up to, at home as well as abroad
3. Foreign policies - those policies that are seen as being legitimate and having moral authority

India's cultural relations with its South Asian neighbours comprises its old civilizational links, shared religious heritage in terms of Hinduism and Buddhism, both classical and contemporary music, dance and art, the fascination with Indian cinema, cuisine, cricket and

fashion, fostering people to people contacts, and the increasing popularity of the beneficial properties of Yoga and Ayurveda.

When it comes to the political values of India, it definitely stands out as compared to its South Asian neighbours because of the political stability that India experiences. This stability can be attributed to India surviving its experiment with democracy adopted soon after independence and at the same time also becoming the largest democracy in the world, and besides this the idea of secularism, unity in diversity and principles of non violence of Gandhi have also aided towards the stability of the country.

In terms of the foreign policy of India, India strives to portray an image of a responsible and capable power. We see an intention to maintain the status quo, characterised by the support for decolonization, disarmament, peaceful co-existence of nations, and most importantly, the non alignment policy. India also strategically uses its diaspora to promote Indian culture abroad, use of international and regional institutions to put forth its interests, to provide foreign aid to the needful countries, and to prove its strength in technological and space diplomacy.

All these soft power strategies that India uses vis-a-vis its neighbours have contributed in strengthening the 'positive image' of India, leading to a relation of trust and cooperation between them. Such an approval for India in its neighbourhood becomes a prerequisite especially because today India is emerging as a major global power and as C.Raja Mohan says no nation can become a credible power on the global stage without enduring primacy in one's own neighbourhood.

However the quest to develop its soft power in the neighbourhood does not come without challenges for India, mostly characterised by its troubled past with some of its neighbours, the major challenge at present comes from China. In the 21st century, South Asia has emerged as a strategic priority for China for several reasons. Apart from being contiguous to Tibet and Xinjiang, South Asia is important for China as major trade routes and sea lanes of communications are located in this region, to utilise which China is building several infrastructure projects. The region also provides China with a huge market and has the potential to emerge as a source of raw materials. In analysing China's soft power outreach to countries in South Asia, development assistance and economic initiatives have been the motives of its policy towards these nations. Deeply aware of China's expanding influence in its neighbourhood, which is a mightier economic and military power, India has taken a number of steps to engage with its neighbouring countries. And to achieve this, India's soft power capabilities assumes importance because according to Kugiel, it can even compensate for India's hard power deficiencies.

At the same time, India also needs to protect its image from internal disruptive elements so that its image of a plural yet tolerant society doesn't get affected as any such disruption would have a derogatory effect on its power projection because as Nye says "soft power may

appear less risky than economic or military power, but it is often hard to use, easy to lose and costly to re-establish".

Thus, if India has to appear as a strong as well as a trustworthy power in South Asia, it becomes imperative for India to employ its soft power tactics in the region which can make it possible for the country to become a "soft power-superpower" of the 21st century.

A lot of relevant literature available on this topic has been reviewed. **Joseph Nye** who has been credited with the birth of the phrase soft power in his book "**Bound to Lead : The Changing Nature of American Power**" (1990) defines it as the state's ability to get preferred outcomes which is possible only if the state is able to make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others. The proof of power according to Nye "lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behaviour of states".

Shashi Tharoor in his book "**Pax Indica : India and the World of the 21st century**" (2012) describes soft power as the associations and attitudes conjured up in the global imagination by the mere mention of a country's name, thus signifying the need for a country to have a dignified image.

Rothman in his article titled "**Revising the Soft Power concept : what are the means and mechanisms of soft power**?" (2011) considers 'success' as a necessary yardstick for any country's soft power because according to him other countries will emulate the policies of another state only when they are convinced that those policies are a source of prosperity.

Samuel Huntington in his book "**The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of World Order**" (1996) also argued along the same lines as Rothman where he believes that it is the material success and influence of the nations that make them attractive. Thus, possessing soft power capabilities is not enough unless the country is able to effectively leverage it.

Patryk Kugiel in his article "**India's Soft Power in South Asia**" (2012) describes South Asia as a "peculiar region marred by inter-state animosities, developmental challenges and a number of paradoxes". In such a region, Kugiel thinks that India has multiple advantages as compared to its neighbours so India should use these advantages through a soft power approach to bring positive outcomes for itself.

Patryk Kugiel has also written a book on soft power titled "**India's Soft power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy**" (2017) where he says that a 'stronger soft power' could help India in being accepted as a leader among South Asian countries, attracting more foreign capital and tourists, and getting increased support to strengthen its position in the international forum, including in the UN Security Council, thereby suggesting the usefulness of soft power capability for India not only at the regional level but also at a global level.

Mukesh Kumar Shrivastava in his opinion on The Statesman titled "**Seeking primacy in the neighbourhood**" (2022) believes that prioritising neighbouring countries in its pursuit of

foreign policy objectives, particularly by helping Sri Lanka and Afghanistan in their time of crisis, is a testimony of India's importance to its Neighbourhood First policy. This in itself suggests the significance that the South Asian region has for India.

Daya Kishan Thussu in his book "**Communicating India's Soft Power : Buddha to Bollywood**" (2013) highlights the extraordinarily rich cultural heritage, both ancient and contemporary, that the Indian state has been bestowed with, which it can utilise as soft power assets.

Christian Wagner in his article "**India's Soft Power : Prospects and Limitations**" (2010) argues that the compulsion to improve India's relations with neighbouring countries was the main reason behind its shift from hard power to soft power approach in South Asia.

In a report submitted by the **Standing Committee on External Affairs on 'India's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy : Prospects and Limitations"** (2022), the Committee has identified four limitations that inhibit India's soft power and cultural diplomacy and recommended promoting tools like yoga, tourism and the interests of Indian diaspora to influence other countries through appeal and attraction.

Nirupama Rao in her article "**The Case for Harnessing Soft Power, Or Why India Cannot be Insular**" (2022) says that 'powerful soft power', despite cultural richness, is only increased when we project the image of a progressive, democratic and equitable society that is a responsible stakeholder in world politics and a contributor to the global public good. To achieve this, she even suggests India to learn from Korea that has today become the model for soft power globally.

Ankita Chatterjee in the article "**Trust, Credibility and Soft Power Diplomacy : India and China**" (2021) believes that China's proactive role in South Asia is impelling India to be more positively involved with the region and this she suggests it can do by primarily building two things : credibility and trust.

Nainika Kumari in her article titled "**Soft Power diplomacy in India's foreign policy under the Modi government : Challenges and Prospects**" (2023) says that under the Modi administration, soft power tools and resources are being used more frequently in India's foreign policy including examples such as promotion of Buddhism, yoga as well as diaspora diplomacy, all of which has helped to build a favourable image for India.

Rajiv Kumar and Manjeeta Singh in their paper on "**India's Role in South Asia Trade and Investment Integration**" (2009), say that the regional integration will not be achieved by India's unilateral actions alone. Neighbouring governments will have to respond positively to Indian initiatives for successful regional integration in South Asia.

Pooja Raghav and Trishna Rai in their article "**India's strategic interest in SAARC countries : Soft power approach**" (2021) opine that India has initiated a large number of

soft power tactics that has brought favourable results in its regional policy. Therefore if it carries on with this strategy in the near future and addresses the flaws in its policy, it can retrieve the identity of a well-founded and commendable regional leader.

Problem to be investigated

- What is the concept of Soft Power and what are the instruments of Soft Power used by India?
- How has India used these instruments of Soft Power in the 21st century, in relation to South Asian countries and how has that aided India?
- What are the challenges for India with the usage of Soft Power and how does it act as a hindrance for India?
- What are the opportunities for India with the usage of Soft Power and how can India further use it to improve relations with its South Asian neighbours?

Objective of the study

- To theoretically understand the concept of Soft Power and its contemporary relevance
- To analyse the instruments used by India to promote its soft power diplomacy with South Asian countries in the 21st century
- To evaluate the obstacles to India's soft power capabilities
- To understand the potential that soft power provides to improve the country's position in South Asia as a credible power

Motivation

This research has been motivated by the immense soft power capabilities that India has possessed throughout history which has assumed significance in modern society. Indian arts, culture, yoga and Ayurveda, cuisine, festivals, music and dance forms, etc. have attracted people from all around the world for centuries. In this sense, the practice of soft power has always been embellished in India's core identity even though the term is relatively new in the foreign policy discourse.

With such great soft power assets at its disposal, India is already a growing global soft power and further effective utilisation of it can make India a soft power-superpower of the 21st century. It is to unravel this prospect for India that motivates this research.

Hypothesis

- Soft Power has contemporary relevance for enhancing a country's image.
- India has used its Soft Power diplomacy in the 21st century to solidify its relations with countries in South Asia.
- India has great potential in utilising its Soft Power instruments to establish itself as a credible power in South Asia.

Research design and methodology

The research will be qualitative and descriptive in nature and a prescriptive solution will be provided to it.

Tools to be used in the collection of data

The research will be based on secondary data sources. The relevant literature available on the topic - comprising books, articles, journals, newspapers, etc. - will be reviewed.

Tentative Chapterisation

Introduction
Chapter 1 - India and South Asia : A Historical Perspective
Chapter 2 - Understanding the Concept of Soft Power
Chapter 3 - Attributes of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy
Chapter 4 - India's strategic interest in South Asia : A Soft Power approach
Chapter 5 - Limitations of Soft Power diplomacy in Indian Foreign Policy
Chapter 6 - Future Prospects of Soft Power
Conclusion

Significance of the study

The end of the Cold war era and the beginning of globalisation brought drastic changes to the international system. This also changed the perception of countries, where countries who earlier used their military might to conquer and expand now started becoming conscious of their image vis-a-vis other countries, where a positive image of a country enabled it to maintain cordial relations with other countries while a negative image affected the relations with other countries.

In such a scenario where the countries want to benefit from their integration into the international system, it becomes important for the countries to have an acceptable image, that is where the usage of soft power diplomacy comes in. And to establish such an image vis-a-vis its neighbours is a prerequisite for a country like India that aims to become a great power.

Contribution to the existing knowledge

A lot of research work would have been done on India's Soft Power capabilities but not many would have particularly looked at the South Asian region and how India aims to lead this region using its soft power hence this topic has been chosen to add to the available knowledge in this field.

Future work

The concerns that are not addressed in this research can be taken up by other researchers. This study can also be a source of inspiration to conduct further research on various aspects of soft power which has assumed utmost significance in recent times.

Related references

Books & Articles -

1. Chatterjee, Ankita (2021) *Trust, Credibility and Soft Power Diplomacy*. Asia in Global Affairs, September 7, 2021.
2. Huntington, Samuel (1996) *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. London: Penguin Books.
3. Jambhulkar, Vikas K. & Mandal, Sushil T. (2021) *India's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia*, IJCRT, Vol. 9, Issue 2.
4. Khanna, Shrey. (2017) *Analysing India's Soft Power Functioning in the Twenty First Century: Possibilities and Challenges*, India Quarterly, August 2017
5. Kugiel, Patryk. (2012) *India's Soft Power in South Asia*. Sage publications.
6. Kugiel, Patryk. (2017) *India's Soft power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy*. Routledge.
7. Kumar, Rajiv & Singh, Manjeeta. (2009) *India's Role in South Asia Trade and Investment Integration*. ADB Working Paper Series on Regional Economic Integration, No.32.
8. Kumari, Nainika. (2023) *Soft Power diplomacy in India's foreign policy under the Modi government : Challenges and Prospects*. International journal of Political Science and Governance, Vol.5.
9. Nye, Joseph S. (1990) *Bound to Lead : The Changing Nature of American Power*. Basic Books : New York.
10. Rao, Nirupama. (2022) *The Case for Harnessing Soft power, or Why India cannot be Insular*. The Wire, January 6, 2022.
11. Raghav, Pooja. & Rai, Trishna. (2021) *India's strategic interest in SAARC countries : Soft power approach*. Journal of Political Sciences

& Public Affairs, Vol.9.

12. Rothman, Steven B. (2011) *Revising the soft power concept: what are the means and mechanisms of soft power*?. Journal of Political Power, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2011.

13. Shrivastava, Mukesh,K.(2022) *Seeking primacy in the neighbourhood.* The Statesman, May 19, 2022.

14. Tharoor, Shashi. (2012) *Pax Indica : India and the World of the 21st century*. New Delhi : Penguin Books.

15. Thussu, Daya K. (2013) *Communicating India's Soft Power : Buddha to Bollywood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

16. Wagner, Christian. (2010) *India's Soft Power : Prospects and Limitations*. India Quarterly, Vol.66, No.4

Websites -
https://theloop.ecpr.eu/indias-soft-power-diplomacy-in-the-modi-era/
https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/indias-soft-power-strategy/295206
https://indiaeducationdiary.in/soft-power-is-indias-greatest-asset-in-the-21st-century-shashitharoor/
https://usanasfoundation.com/the-rise-of-indias-soft-power-approach-to-global-politics

Reports -
Standing Committee on External Affairs - Report on "India's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Prospects and Limitations"
https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/india-s-soft-power-and-cultural-diplomacy